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*Citation for published version (APA):*

Van Steen, G. A. H. (2016). Comedy and Tragedy in Agon(y): The 1902 Comedy Panathenaia of Andreas Nikolaras. In P. Walsh (Ed.), *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Aristophanes* (Vol. 8, pp. 240-262). (Brill's Companions to Classical Reception; Vol. 8). Brill.

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## Comedy and Tragedy in Agon(y): The 1902 Comedy *Panathenaia* of Andreas Nikolaras

Gonda Van Steen

### Abstract

In 1902, Andreas Nikolaras (1850-?) published a modern Greek comedy in three acts and called it *Panathenaia*. The *agon* of this Athenocentric play is modeled after the second half of Aristophanes' *Frogs*, but the full script reveals reminiscences of other ancient comedies as well. For pitting Aristophanes against Sophocles, the modern *agon* delivers insight into early twentieth-century Greek conceptualizations of comedy and tragedy. Aristophanes, Sophocles, Athena, and Hermes appear as main characters and engage in a fierce debate about the value of theater versus sport and of the comic genre versus tragic poetry. These disputes reflect the surge of contemporary comedy invoking its classical pedigree, at a time when the modern Greek reception of tragedy was vibrant but crisis-prone (exemplified by the 1903 *Oresteika* riots).

This chapter discusses Nikolaras' *Panathenaia* as a sample of modern Greek Aristophanizing comedy and also as an attempt at literary criticism (in the comic but Aristotelian vein). A first, brief study of Nikolaras' forgotten play may, therefore, make a valuable contribution to classical reception studies with focus on Aristophanes' modern Greek history and his work's creative blending with other genres and traditions. It also shows, however, how the iconic significance of ancient tragedy still outshone the meaning and function given to Attic comedy, even in a modern, Aristophanizing play. Finally, this chapter may add to our general knowledge of Greek theater history of the early twentieth century, drawing attention to marginalized texts from a neglected periphery.

### Introduction: Competition is Key

Ὅσοι ἐπιθυμεῖτε νὰ φθάσητε μέχρι τῆς ἀρχαιότητος καὶ νὰ ἴδῃτε δι' ἀσθενοῦς μὲν φακοῦ ἀλλὰ συγχρόνως καὶ μεθ' ἑλληνικῆς ὑπερηφανείας τὴν μεγάλην τῆς ἀρχαιότητος εὐκλειαν καὶ τὴν χάριν τῶν μεταξὺ τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τῆς ἀνθρωπότητος αἰσθημάτων ἀναγνώσατε τὴν παροῦσαν κωμωδίαν. Θὰ γελάσητε εὐγενῆ καὶ εὐφρόσυνον γέλωτα, πλὴν συγχρόνως καὶ σκεπτικοὶ θὰ φιλοσοφήσητε ἐπὶ τοῦ συγχρόνου βίου.

All of you, read the present comedy, you who desire to reach into antiquity and to see antiquity's great glory, [be it] through a weak lens but at the same time also with Greek pride; you who long to see the delightful sentiments of divine and human interaction. You will break into a polite and prudent laughter, except that, because you are also skeptical, you will at the same time reflect on contemporary life. (5)

These words preface the 1902 comedy *Panathenaia* written by the playwright and poet Andreas D. Nikolaras, about whom very little is known. Theater historian Giannes Sideres mentioned this modern Greek comedy only ever so briefly in his *History of Modern Greek Theater, 1794-1944*.<sup>1</sup> Nikolaras' earliest extant publications date to the 1870s and 1880s: his one-act comedy entitled *Τυφλομυρία* (*Blind Man's Bluff*) was published in Athens in 1877, and his comic idyll (*Η χαϊδεμένη* (*The Favorite*)) was

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<sup>1</sup> Sideres (1990) 138.

issued in 1885.<sup>2</sup> The year 1890 saw the publication of Nikolaras' comedy on a popular theme: *Ο προικοθήρας* (*The Dowry Hunter*), about the phenomenon of gold-digger grooms. The title of Nikolaras' 1902 play *Panathenaia* conjured up the atmosphere of the Panathenaic Festival of classical Athens, which celebrated the birthday of Athena, the city's patron goddess, and featured poetry and musical competitions as well as athletic games.<sup>3</sup> But this title bore early twentieth-century connotations as well. A Greek journal by the name of *Panathenaia* was issued from 1900 through 1915. A few years after the publication date of Nikolaras' comedy, the name *Panathenaia* became synonymous with a popular tradition of *epitheoreseis*, that is, annual revue shows. These *Panathenaia* shows (1907-1923) set the tone of urban Greek theatrical and musical life for more than fifteen years.<sup>4</sup> The genre was known to comment on current affairs, albeit mostly in a lighter vein. The 1913 *epitheorese*, for instance, went by the title of *Πολεμικά Παναθήναια* (*Wartime Panathenaia*) and referred to the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913, in which the dispute over Macedonia drove the Greek state to reassert its nationalist interests.<sup>5</sup> This revue was written by Bambes Anninos, Georgios Tsokopoulos, and Polyvios Demetrakopoulos.<sup>6</sup> Demetrakopoulos, who also went by the French-sounding pseudonym of Pol [Paul] Arcas, was one of Greece's most prolific early twentieth-century authors and free-spirited translators of Aristophanes. This same trio put Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* to comic use at the onset of the First World War, in the *Panathenaia* of 1915. They boldly called their work the *International Panathenaia of 1915*, and it starred versatile female characters resembling Aristophanic heroines. The fictional women of 1915 who call for worldwide peace resort to Lysistrata's old weapon of a sex strike.<sup>7</sup> They ignore the war's real drama and abuse the crisis as a pretext for teasing and taunting their men.<sup>8</sup> Nikolaras' 1902 comedy and the other Aristophanizing plays with which it shared the name *Panathenaia* gave voice to some of the best and the worst of the turn-of-the-century spectacle culture of the Athenian Belle Époque, an era that was, unlike its model in Western Europe, *not* cut off by the onset of the First World War, but was somewhat artificially continued until Greece entered the military fray in 1917.

Other names, dates, and facts play a role, too, when trying to contextualize Nikolaras' *Panathenaia* and its comic source material. The 1902 play pivots on the theme of competition, which is a topic that drives not only the *Frogs* (405 BCE) but also several other plays of Aristophanes. Of course, the City Dionysia, the grand festivals at which the annual selections of comedies and tragedies were presented in fifth-century BCE Athens, were highly competitive. Aristophanes, too, displayed a profound knowledge of his rivals, their strengths, and their (exaggerated) weaknesses.<sup>9</sup> Nikolaras saw the rise of several rivals in addition to Demetrakopoulos: the satirist and pundit Georgios Soures, for instance, delivered a risqué version of Aristophanes' *Clouds* in 1900 that remained popular for many

<sup>2</sup> Chatzепantazes and Maraka (1981) offer an insightful introduction to the modern Greek folk idyll (in the so-called ethnographic tradition).

<sup>3</sup> The collective volume edited by Neils (1996) discusses the ancient Panathenaia from various religious, historical, and archaeological angles, whereas Nagy (2002) sheds further light on the festival's components of poetry, music, and song. See also Shear (2001) and Sourvinou-Inwood (2011) 263-311.

<sup>4</sup> Chatzепantazes and Maraka (1977) study and illustrate this popular urban genre, which intersected with the Greek reception history of Aristophanes. See Van Steen (2000) 108.

<sup>5</sup> Lila Maraka (2000) edited and published the script of the 1913 *Wartime Panathenaia* in the second volume of her collection of texts representative of the Athenian *epitheorese*.

<sup>6</sup> On Demetrakopoulos, see Van Steen (2000) 102-106 and *passim*, (2002), and (2013).

<sup>7</sup> Robson (2009) offers a recent introduction to the complex art of Aristophanes. Van Steen (2000) 16-75 provides more background on the eighteenth and nineteenth-century reception of Aristophanes in modern Greece.

<sup>8</sup> Van Steen (2013) 759-761 quotes an excerpt of the women's song, taken from Demetrakopoulos, Anninos, and Tsokopoulos (1915) 21-22.

<sup>9</sup> See further Bakola (2010) and Biles (2011).

years, in Athens and beyond.<sup>10</sup> Nikolaras' theme of competition, however, is multi-faceted. It reconnects with one of the central premises of Aristophanes' *Frogs* when it weighs playwrights against each other and engages the tragic genre and even the bravado culture of bodily strength (or the lack of manly prowess in the opening scenes between Dionysus and his slave Xanthias). The 1902 *agon* presents Aristophanes and Sophocles, comedy and tragedy's respective incarnations, in competition with each other. The number of Greek playwrights and stage directors of revival tragedy of the turn of the century was small, but they had the advantage of being well-established and could endow tragedy with the kind of public prestige that comedy had yet to see. Georgios Mistriotes, for one, was a conservative classics professor from the University of Athens who turned stage director with a predilection for Sophocles. He subjected the *Antigone* and other plays to amateur productions in ancient Greek and to the spurious ambitions of philological and archaeological "faithfulness." To reclaim Sophocles and classical theater, Mistriotes had founded the Society for the Staging of Ancient Greek Drama, which was active from December 1895 until 1906.<sup>11</sup> The Society's 1896 *Antigone* was far from successful, but some critics nonetheless appreciated the effort of the student-amateurs. Mistriotes' work marked a decade of protectionist theater activity which laid exclusive claims to presenting "patriotic" drama in the name of the inherited Hellenic civilization and the legacy of the ancient Greek language. In fact, he was one of the last and most tenacious defenders of the linguistic ideal that rejected modern Greek translations (in any register) of ancient Greek texts, and he sported an absolutist sense of the didactic and cultural mission of such a language policy. Non-translation of classical plays, however, meant limited dissemination and narrowed the potential for viable stage production.

Other contemporary Greek directors such Konstantinos Chrestomanos and Thomas Oikonomou made bolder and more effective attempts to revive classical tragedy. Chrestomanos was a prose author and playwright, aesthete and romantic, who had spent many years working in the service of Empress Elizabeth of Austria. Upon his return to Athens, he founded the Nea Skene, the New Stage Company (1901-1906), which began its career in ancient drama with a promising production of Euripides' *Alcestis*, followed by Sophocles' *Antigone*. Like its rival, the more conservative Royal Theater, the New Stage Company helped render early twentieth-century Greek drama more professional. In 1903, however, the Royal Theater's director Oikonomou became the focus of a nationwide controversy when incidents surrounding his prestigious production of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* turned into street riots claiming casualties. Oikonomou had chosen to present his unique premiere of Aeschylus' trilogy in a prose adaptation in the formal Katharevousa language but, following the translation provided by the classical archaeologist Georgios Soteriades, he allowed for many Demotic touches and occasional trite expressions. The director's "all too liberal" choice and its success enraged the reactionary Mistriotes, whose students had grown increasingly frustrated with the rise of tragic revival productions in the "unworthy" idiom of the Demotic language or of a "contaminated" Katharevousa. The sharpening divisions between modernists and classicists or classicizers came to a head in the bloody clashes between the conservative students and the Athens police trying to protect enthusiastic spectators. These 1903 clashes, to which the name of *Oresteika* remained attached, have, unfortunately, gone down in history as a narrowly national issue, as nationalist rows symptomatic of the linguistic fanaticism that fueled the Greek Language Question. The Christian Scriptures and pagan classical tragedy were the two main objects of contestation between progressive, demoticizing translation and linguistic dogma, and they were conjoined as victims beset by a common enemy. The year 1901 had seen the *Euangeli(a)ka*, the

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<sup>10</sup> Van Steen (2000) 91-102 analyzes Soures' *Clouds* of 1900. On Soures as a playwright and satirist, see Bakonikola-Georgopoulou (2000b) and (2007) 209-216; and Papaïoannou (1986) 49-56. See also Chatzepantazes (2004) 198-200 and Giannakopoulou (2015) 92-94, 96-97, 99.

<sup>11</sup> Sideres (1976) 113-116, 125.

violent Gospel Riots, or the protests staged against the Demotic translation of the New Testament published by Alexandros Palles.<sup>12</sup> The language of Nikoularas' 1902 *Panathenaia* is a confident vernacular Greek idiom. It testifies to the fact that modern Greek comedy and also the earliest revivals of Aristophanes' plays could more easily implement progressive linguistic choices.<sup>13</sup>

Nikoularas keeps his adaptation of Aristophanes' *Frogs* free and liberal, in order for it to accommodate flexibly the contemporary challenges to the artistic conventions and autonomy of comedy. The years around the turn to the twentieth century reveal a fascination with the quick upmarch of Demotic satire and popular comedy, and the 1902 play was not an exception.<sup>14</sup> Both genres constituted entertainment options that conversed with French models while shaping an urban Greek public.<sup>15</sup> A more daunting competitor to theater, however, was the spectacle of sports, which was all the rage in the early 1900s. Nikoularas' comedy opposes theater performance to sporting spectacle, and he thereby taps into the talk of the town. After the 1896 inauguration of the first modern Olympics in Athens (commonly referred to in Greek as the *Agones*) and following the 1900 Games in Paris, discussion was ongoing as to where the Games would be held subsequently. St Louis, Missouri, was soon given the go-ahead to prepare for the third Games in the sequence of international Olympics, to be held in 1904. Originally, the Greeks had hoped to make Athens the permanent site for the international Games, but Pierre de Coubertin had the Games moved to Paris and then ceded to the wishes of American sporting powers. Under pressure of the Greeks, however, the International Olympic Committee agreed in 1901 to hold the first so-called Intercalated or Intercalary Olympic Games in Athens again. These intermediary Games, intended to honor the Greek capital's leading role in reviving the Olympics, did not take place in the end. By the time decisions were finalized, the year 1902 was around the corner, which did not leave enough time for Athens to prepare for the first Intercalated Games. But the Greeks still expected the 1901 agreement to hold, and the next set of Intercalated Games was scheduled for and actually held in Athens in 1906. This (untenable) system of Games held locally and in between the internationally organized Olympics was then discontinued.<sup>16</sup> Significantly, however, the Athenians of 1902 were keenly focused on sporting contests to come, and their city remained at the center of the discussions, even as it was plagued by social problems and financial woes. Rapidly urbanizing Athens had started to explore

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<sup>12</sup> See further Van Steen (2008). For an analysis of the complex Language Question (*Glossiko Zetema*), see Beaton (1999) 296-365; and Horrocks (1997) 344-348. The Language Question, or the decades-long struggle to determine a national language, was perhaps the most poignant expression of the uncertainty about modern Greek identity. The nineteenth-century Greek intelligentsia advanced the artificially reconstructed register of the Katharevousa over the vernacular (even though there were many shades to the Demotike, including literary and other written forms), in order to address the ideological needs of the nation-building project, with its many stakes vested in historical continuity and pure lineage. In the largely uncharted domain of state-subsidized revival tragedy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, this question boiled down to the director's--or the institution's--choice between delivering the text in the original ancient Greek or using a translation in Katharevousa, by then the official idiom of the state, the bureaucracy, and formal education. Both the choices of ancient Greek and Katharevousa, however, were far from presenting viable theatrical options. An academic shift to the study of broader issues of Greek national identity, of which performance, translation, and language remain constitutive elements, has been long overdue. See recently, however, Mackridge (2009).

<sup>13</sup> See further Van Steen (2000) 43-44.

<sup>14</sup> Nineteenth-century Greek satire intersected with the genres of comedy and the revue and also with the subject matter of Attic comedy. For more on Aristophanes and his influence on the nineteenth-century Greek satirical press, see Chatzепantazes (2004) 163-182; and Van Steen (2000) 52-54, 92-94.

<sup>15</sup> Chatzепantazes (2004) 106-108, 143 further discusses the genre of the short entertainment comedy in prose, adopted by Nikoularas.

<sup>16</sup> Young (1996) 161-166 provides a full, authoritative account of the Olympics of the early 1900s.

the landscape of modernism, even though the terrain ahead proved to be unfamiliar and uneven.<sup>17</sup> Nikolaras' fictitious character of Pentathlos, whom his fellow Athenians revere as if he were a demigod, embodies the city's enthrallment with athletic valor.

### A "Panathenaic" Comedy in Three Acts

Nikolaras' *Panathenaia* is set in Athens in the fifth century BCE, κατὰ τὴν ἀκμὴν τῆς καλλιτεχνίας ἐν τῇ ἀρχαιότητι ("during the heyday of the arts in antiquity," 6). The comedy's cast list is long (6): with no less than twenty-one characters and a number of extras (Athenian citizens), the play is well populated, and many of its scenes feature more than three characters. The key figures, however, are: the rich *choregos* Kephalos; the victorious Athenian athlete Pentathlos; the god Hermes, a character in Aristophanes' *Peace* and *Wealth*; Sophocles the tragedian; Aristophanes the comic playwright; Kallinikos, Askias, and Kinyras, three artists entirely vested in their occupation of tragic poet/actor, chorus dancer, and singer, respectively; Trygaeus the tavern-keeper (loosely modeled after the lead character of Aristophanes' *Peace*); Arsinoe, the fiancée of Pentathlos; the goddess Athena; and the Muses Melpomene (originally personifying the art of singing and hence the Muse of Tragedy) and Thalia (the Muse of Comedy). Several more female figures fulfill roles ranging from star-struck admirers to love interests of Pentathlos. The minor characters play a relatively large part in the comedy's first two acts, whereas the better known figures such as Sophocles, Aristophanes, Athena, Melpomene, and Thalia dominate Act Three.

Act One and Two of the *Panathenaia* set a festive atmosphere, befitting the Panathenaic Festivals of classical Athens. The subtitle of Act One (7-34), Θεὸς διασκεδάζων ("A God Having a Good Time," 7), refers to Hermes, who soon turns the play into a comedy of errors, by appearing as the athlete Pentathlos mingling with other mortals. The act's eight scenes follow in quick succession. At the end of one of the festival days, four male friends meet on the road, and, as they are drinking wine, they banter about and sing the praises of Dionysus, the god of wine and the theater. When they notice the throngs of people hurrying to the house of Kephalos, the generous *choregos* who has emerged successful in the most recent drama competitions, they, too, decide to go and congratulate the winner. Kephalos

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<sup>17</sup> Matthiopoulos (2005) offers a more comprehensive picture of life in Athens in the 1890s through 1900s. From the perspective of the urban sociologist, Giannakopoulou (2015) 75-78 stresses the concept of Athens' metropolitan modernity and the special demands it placed on the new capital city in earlier decades of the nineteenth century. Gallant (2015) 212-219, 303-304 outlines Greek social trends and divisions, urban lifestyles, and nascent feminism of the same decades. Chasape-Christodoulou (2012) centers on modernist trends in Greek theater of the 1900s through 1931. So does Papazoglou (2014) when she lets modern Greek literary and theater critics of those decades speak and add their voices to the broader debate of moderns versus ancients. In January of 1904, a disenchanted Isadora Duncan left Greece after a one-year-long stay, during which she saw the *Oresteia* riots. See Duncan (1955) 133-134 and also Seiragakis (2013) 22. Nikolaras, however, did not show any particular interest in the dance paradigms launched by Duncan at the time of his own writing: while discussing choral song and dance in a competitive framework, the 1902 comedy leaves no room for a separate chorus in imitation of Aristophanes' vital and often highly lyrical choruses. Seiragakis (2013) insightfully situates the 1904 Athenian production of Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazusae*, staged by Konstantinos Chrestomanos, in its larger cultural context, with emphasis on contemporary developments in music and choreography and their blending of Wagnerian elements and urban Greek folk traditions. After expounding on his views on ancient drama and classical culture in a 1901 manifesto, Chrestomanos had been making waves in Athens, and his modernist interpretations of both classical tragedy and comedy were much talked about in the capital's intellectual circles. The director's work with the Nea Skene, or New Stage, however, was short-lived. By the time the company disbanded in 1906, the critics' attention had turned elsewhere, but Chrestomanos's influence proved to be more enduring in the long run. See further Seiragakis (2013) 31 and Van Steen (2000) 102-103, 115.

comes out to greet the well-wishers, and he graciously attributes his victory to Kallinikos, Askias, and Kinyras, or to the tragic poet/actor, chorus dancer, and singer, respectively. But his mind is already on the next contest, the pentathlon, and he goes looking for the renowned Pentathlos, after whom the contest has been named. No sooner do the citizens depart than Hermes appears. Zeus has sent him down to earth to stir trouble among the Athenians, who, he complains, have become too preoccupied with athletic contests, theater performances, and festivities in general. Variants of this theme occur in several of Aristophanes' comedies (*Clouds*, *Peace*, *Birds*, *Wealth*).<sup>18</sup> The gods have been neglected by the

<sup>18</sup> One example from each of the four plays mentioned may suffice to clarify this point. In *Clouds* 607-626, the chorus leader engages in a sustained reference to ominous eclipses, stated proofs of cosmic or divine displeasure, and to the Athenians' lax--or, in reality, challenged--use of the lunar calendar. The chorus had responded to an earlier mention of a lunar eclipse with an invocation of Apollo, the sun-god (*Clouds* 595-596), suggesting complicity between moon and sun. The chorus leader delivers a comic rationale on the moon's behalf, explaining why "she" is angrily withholding her light from the Athenians:

ήνιχ' ήμεῖς δεῦρ' ἀφορμᾶσθαι παρεσκευάσμεθα,  
ή Σελήνη ξυντυχοῦσ' ήμῖν ἐπέστειλεν φράσαι  
πρῶτα μὲν χαίρειν Ἀθηναίοισι καὶ τοῖς συμμαχοῖς·  
εἶτα θυμαίνειν ἔφασκε. δεινὰ γὰρ πεπονθέναι  
ὠφελοῦσ' ὑμᾶς ἅπαντας οὐ λόγοις ἀλλ' ἐμφανῶς

...  
ἄλλα τ' εὖ δρᾶν φησὶν, ὑμᾶς δ' οὐκ ἄγειν τὰς ἡμέρας  
οὐδὲν ὀρθῶς, ἀλλ' ἄνω τε καὶ κάτω κυδοιδοπᾶν

When we [i.e., the chorus of clouds] were ready to set forth on our trip here, the Moon happened to run into us and told us first to say hello to the Athenians and their allies, but then she expressed her annoyance at the awful way she has been treated, after helping you all not with mere talk but with plain action.

...  
She says that though she does you other favors too, you don't keep track of your dates correctly, but scramble them topsy-turvy . . . .

(*Clouds* 607-611, 615-616; transl. Henderson)

Upon Trygaeus' arrival on Mount Olympus, it is Hermes who answers the door (*Peace* 177-180). Trygaeus learns that Zeus and the other gods are not at home, where he expected to find them: disgusted with the bellicose Greeks, the Olympians have removed themselves far from the mortals' fighting and praying (*Peace* 204-212).

In *Birds* 1514-1524, Prometheus furtively reports on the Olympians' sense of threat and despair at the neglect that they have been suffering from the Greeks. Pisthetaerus and the birds have been preoccupied with defending their new city in the air and have prevented sacrificial smoke from reaching the heavens.

Lastly, *Wealth* 1099-1123 features Hermes once more: he complains to the slave Cario that the Athenians have been ignoring the gods, which has provoked the anger of Zeus:

ΕΡΜΗΣ	ὁ Ζεὺς, ὃ πόνηρε, βούλεται εἰς ταῦτόν ὑμᾶς συγκυκλήσας τρύβλιον ἀπαξᾶπαντας εἰς τὸ βάραθρον ἐμβαλεῖν.
ΚΑΡΙΩΝ	ή γλῶττα τῷ κήρυκι τούτων τέμνεται. ἀτὰρ διὰ τί δὴ ταῦτ' ἐπιβουλεύει ποιεῖν ήμᾶς;

ΕΡΜΗΣ	ὅτι δεινότατα πάντων πραγμάτων εἵργασθ'. ἀφ' οὗ γὰρ ἤρξατ' ἐξ ἀρχῆς βλέπειν ὁ Πλοῦτος, οὐδεὶς οὐ λιβανωτόν, οὐ δάφνην, οὐ ψαιστόν, οὐχ ἱερεῖον, οὐκ ἄλλ' οὐδὲ ἐν ήμῖν ἔτι θύει τοῖς θεοῖς.
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Athenians, who do not even fear Zeus' lightning bolts any longer. The fault lies with the philosophers and Aristophanes, who disclose the workings of natural phenomena and demystify the Olympians' role (echoes of *Clouds*).<sup>19</sup> Hermes has transformed himself into another Pentathlos to better carry out his punitive mission, and, in this guise, he meets various female fans and love interests of the athlete (scenes 4-6). The god appears to all of Pentathlos' flames and to his fiancée without revealing his true identity. This repeated scenario is reminiscent of the plots of Greek New Comedy and also of Plautus' *Amphitryon*, named after the husband of Alcmena, whom Jupiter seduces pretending to be her spouse. As a pseudo-Pentathlos, however, Hermes is also cornered by the elderly and possessive Glauke, whose advances he rejects. By the end of Act One, Hermes/Pentathlos heads out to the athletic contests.

In the first act, Nikolaras has unabashedly fused elements from classical comedy at large with particulars from the respective traditions of Aristophanes, Menander, and the Roman comic playwrights.<sup>20</sup> He has seasoned this blend with touches of the modern comedy of manners and of the mythological parodies-operettas of Jacques Offenbach (such as his tremendously popular *La belle Hélène*, *The Beautiful Helen [of Troy]*, 1864, in which the themes of disguise, deception, and seduction drive the stage action). Like the libretti of Offenbach, Nikolaras' play, too, overlays components of classical antiquity with a contemporary veneer; the anachronistic context further demythologizes some of the loftiest characters of the ancient pantheon of gods and men of letters.<sup>21</sup> At times, early twentieth-century concerns clash with the classical settings; at other times, ancient exigencies mimic those of Athens in 1902. But the vein of humor that runs most deeply through Nikolaras' comedy is the one drawn from Aristophanes: the scene that has Hermes/Pentathlos trying to escape from the lecherous Glauke, in the presence of two amorous and competing young women, shows how the modern playwright returns to the oldest and most striking example of such a (dis)entanglement, Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazusae* (ll. 877-1111), in which three older women compete for one young man. The following quotation from the 1902 comedy proves just how carefully Nikolaras has been reading Aristophanes:

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HERMES	It's Zeus, you rascal: he's ready to mash up every last one of you in the same bowl and toss you into the executioner's pit!
CARIO	For this news the tongue gets sliced for the Herald. But what's his reason for wanting to do that to us?
HERMES	Because you've committed the most terrible deeds. Ever since Wealth recovered his original sight, no one has offered us gods any sort of sacrifice: no incense, no bay, no barley cake, no victim, not a single thing.

(*Wealth* 1107-1116; transl. Henderson)

<sup>19</sup> Of all memorable scenes starring Socrates in the *Clouds*, the philosopher's "airwalk" and inspection of the sun (*Clouds* 225) are most worthy of mention. Through the practices and statements of his comic hero, Aristophanes himself, too, can be said to have disclosed the workings of the celestial phenomena and to have debunked the prestige of the Olympians. Early on in the play, Socrates defiantly asks, ποίους θεοὺς ὁμεῖ σύ; "What do you mean, you'll swear by the gods?," claiming that θεοὶ ἡμῖν νόμιμον οὐκ ἔστι, "gods aren't legal tender here" (*Clouds* 247; transl. Henderson). Next, he is seen praying to the clouds (ll. 269-274). Statements by Socrates questioning the existence of the Olympians reoccur throughout the play, and they are increasingly shared by the rest of the comedy's characters.

<sup>20</sup> Braden (2010) and Teld (2010) address the classical tradition of Aristophanes and Menander, respectively.

<sup>21</sup> Van Steen (2013) 749 notes Offenbach's popularity in Greece in the later decades of the nineteenth century. Munteanu (2012) 90 discusses the impact of the use of classical texts as well as ancient myths by the librettists who collaborated with Offenbach, reiterating that "Offenbach's librettists managed to create burlesque versions of classical myth using two main techniques: (a) the mixture of times and (b) the degradation of heroism." On forms of the burlesque, see further Miola (2010a) 220-221.



ΕΡΜΗΣ

Ποιὰ εἶσαι, σύ,  
γραῖα Ἑκάβη!

...

σύ, ἀγάπη εἶσαι μακαρίτισα!

...

Πάει, πέταξε  
τ' ἀηδόνι τῆς ἀγάπης· θέλει ἄνοιξιν  
νὰ κελαϊδήσῃ, ὅχι βαρυχειμωνιάν

ΛΥΣΙΠΟΡΠΗ

Δὲν ἔχει δόντια, ἔχει τοῦτο τὸ καλόν.

ΛΕΥΚΗ

Ἀλλ' ὅμως ἔχει νύχια κ' εἶναι τὸ αὐτό.

...

ΛΥΣΙΠΟΡΠΗ

Ὁ Πένταθλος δὲν εἶναι γιὰ τὰ δόντια σου.  
Ἐκεῖνα, Γλαύκη, ποῦ δὲν ἔχεις δηλαδή.

ΛΕΥΚΗ

Σύ, τώρα πρέπει νὰ γλυκοσαλιάζεσαι,  
μονάχα μὲ τὸ χάρο, ποῦ σὲ τριγυρνᾷ.

...

ΛΥΣΙΠΟΡΠΗ

Σὲ περιμένει, τρέχουν, λές, τὰ σάλιά του,  
τοῦ χάρου, ποῦ σὲ βλέπει· σ' ἐρωτεύθηκε.

ΛΕΥΚΗ

Δὲν τοῦ γλυτόνεις, Γλαύκη, ποῦ θε νὰ τοῦ πᾶς.

ΛΥΣΙΠΟΡΠΗ

Ὁ χάρων σὲ προσμένει μὲ τ' ἀκάτιον,  
τοῦ Πλούτωνος νὰ ἴδῃς τὰ βασίλεια!

...

ΛΥΣΙΠΟΡΠΗ καὶ ΛΕΥΚΗ (Σύρουσαι τὸν Ἑρμῆν).

Ἐλθὲ μαζί μας εἰς τὸν οἶκον, Πένταθλε!

ΕΡΜΗΣ

Ἔχω ἀγῶνα σήμερον, μὴ σπεύδητε! (22-31)

HERMES (to Glauke)

Who are you,  
old Hecuba!

...

You, my dear, God rest your soul!

...

It's gone, the nightingale of love  
has flown off: for it to sing,  
it must be spring, not heavy winter.

LYSIPORPE (about Glauke)

She has no teeth, that's one good thing.

LEUKE

But she has fingernails, which comes down to the same.

...

LYSIPORPE (to Glauke)

Pentathlos is not for you to sink your teeth in,  
That is, Glauke, the teeth you no longer have.<sup>22</sup>

LEUKE

You, you must now bill and coo  
only with Charon, who is hovering around you.

...

LYSIPORPE

Charon is waiting for you. Rather, he's salivating  
just looking at you: he has fallen in love with you.

LEUKE

You cannot escape him, Glauke, no matter where you turn.

LYSIPORPE

Charon is waiting for you with his boat,  
for you to go and see the kingdom of Pluto!<sup>23</sup>

...

LYSIPORPE and LEUKE (Pulling at Hermes)

Come with us into the house, Pentathlos!

HERMES

I am competing today, no rush!

In the ninth scene of Act Two, Nikolaras adds an unexpected twist to this earlier encounter with the ugly but well-to-do Glauke. Like a modern gigolo, Pentathlos has had some erotic dealings with Glauke and he continues to expect payment for his "services."<sup>24</sup> When he confronts Glauke, she becomes irate, because she has just been humiliated and rejected by Hermes/Pentathlos, who was unaware of her "legitimate" claim to her young lover. Thus Nikolaras boldly diverts from his ancient model, adding new levels of incongruity and intrigue meant to grab attention. The modern playwright also raises the levels of suspense by letting his public wonder whether the young women will catch on. These accretions of action-filled plot and dramatic irony bring the 1902 comedy closer to the (French) revue themes of romantic intrigue and betrayal.

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<sup>22</sup> The toothless Glauke, whom the young women try to stop from "devouring" Hermes/Pentathlos, recalls the bogey-woman Empusa, who nearly consumes the young man of *Eccles.* 1056. The hideous Empusa also terrifies Dionysus in *Frogs* 293.

<sup>23</sup> Verbal allusions to the near-death status of the older women of the closing scenes of Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazusae* are frequent (ll. 905, 926, 1035, 1073). Aristophanes' young woman also insists that an old woman is only good enough for an old lover (Geres, in *Eccles.* 932). Nikolaras presents Charon as the lover who will elope with the older woman to ... Hades.

<sup>24</sup> Aristophanes does not elaborate on his hint of a hypothetical exchange of (tax) money for male sexual services in *Eccles.* 1006-1007. Even though the young woman and also the first older woman to appear in the ancient comedy are both female prostitutes, monetary payment is not foremost on their mind. Nikolaras presents Lysiporpe as an easily bedazzled female fan of Pentathlos, but her name, "the one who loosens her buckle," might be suggestive of more intimate encounters. Also, the word πόρπη, "buckle" or "clasp," is a near-homonym of πόρνη, "whore."

Act Two (35-68) consists of a dozen scenes and is subtitled Τὸ συμπόσιον (“The Symposium,” 35). Enter Trygaeus the tavern-owner, who starts giving orders to his servants (as in the opening of Aristophanes’ *Peace*). He expects the victorious Pentathlos to come over and to give his laurel wreath to his daughter Arsinoe. The real Pentathlos arrives, hands over his wreath to his fiancée as a token of his commitment, and takes off again. When Hermes/Pentathlos arrives shortly thereafter, he confounds the others who assume he was just with them. Kephalos then invites everyone over to his house. There the party-goers engage in a sequence of toasts, and the first one honors Pentathlos. Kallinikos, however, calls attention to the hard work of the tragic actor and promptly receives his well-wishes. Hermes/Pentathlos asks the company next to drink to the health of the singer Kinyras and then to the dancer Askias. Tension rises when Kallinikos and Kinyras take offense at being compared to a dancer and start arguing whether more admiration should be bestowed upon the tragic acting of the former or on the singing of the latter. When the two disgruntled men turn on Pentathlos, unaware of his real identity (Hermes), the indignant athlete (god) counters by boasting about his muscle power. Askias tells them all to stop bickering and names his own dancing as the greatest achievement. The brawl only deteriorates, despite the host’s call for order. Kephalos then proposes that they go and fetch Sophocles and Aristophanes in the Theater of Dionysus nearby and ask the two experts to decide on the matters under dispute. Kallinikos, Kinyras, and Askias serve as stand-ins for their artistic skills, and, similarly, the two playwrights represent the tragic and the comic genre. Using the three artists as thinly disguised foils, Nikolaras’ second act pits the typical components of classical tragedy against each other. It also questions the value of tragedy as a genre before the appeal of athletic capabilities. Notably, Aristophanes himself has been called in as a character and judge, even though the play has not yet begun to compare tragedy and comedy. Nonetheless, the dispute and imminent *agon* (*agones*) have become more and more reminiscent of the latter half and especially of the judgment scene of Aristophanes’ *Frogs*.

Act Three (69-94) consists of seven scenes and is subtitled Ὁ ἀπὸ μηχανῆς θεός (“The *Deus ex machina*,” 69). The first scene, set in a stoa near the Theater of Dionysus, presents Sophocles and Aristophanes in conversation. When Kephalos, Pentathlos, and the others catch up with them, they explain that they have been arguing about the preeminence of various art forms and are now seeking the poets’ judgment. Aristophanes and Sophocles only hesitatingly accept. Kallinikos flatters Sophocles by calling him an ideal evaluator. His brief statement reveals how Sophocles’ tragedy was being read and received in early twentieth-century Greece:

Σύ, εἰς τὸ δράμα τιμωρεῖς τὸ ἔγκλημα,  
καὶ ἀνυψῶνεις λάμπουσιν τὴν ἀρετὴν,  
μέχρι τῶν ἀθανάτων εἰς τὸν Ὀλυμπόν! (73)

You [Sophocles], in your drama you punish crime  
and you uphold virtue as a shining example,  
even to the immortals on Olympus!

This morality-driven assessment prepares for the goddess Athena’s pronouncement about the nature and function of tragedy in general (87, quoted below). Kinyras concurs and reiterates the punitive tendency of Sophoclean tragedy:

Σύ, ὅστις φέρεις πάντοτ’ ἐπὶ τῆς σκηνῆς,  
ἀστράπτουσιν τὴν σπάθην τῆς Νεμέσεως,  
καὶ ῥιπτομένους τοῦ Διὸς τοὺς κεραυνούς

κατὰ τῶν ἀνοσίων, . . . σύ,  
ὀφείλεις νὰ μᾶς κρίνης! (73)

You [Sophocles], you bring to the stage  
the flashing sword of Nemesis  
and the thunderbolts thrown by Zeus  
against the impious. . . . You,  
you must judge us!

The reluctant Aristophanes tries to dodge the thorny responsibility, claiming that comedy--and therefore he as a comic playwright--has no business intervening in matters of tragedy. He delegates the task to Sophocles alone, who will have to weigh the arts of Kallinikos, Kinyras, and Askias, or to declare his preference for sports. Tragic acting, singing, and dancing are in competition with athletic prowess or with less lofty forms of muscle power. Along with the charged debate, the standoff between the real Pentathlos and the imposter Hermes continues, until Sophocles unmasks the latter. On second thought, Aristophanes claims that, for being a comedian, he must have the better judgment, but Kallinikos and Sophocles are quick to contest his claim, and they call tragedy superior--a statement with which the comic playwright promptly takes issue. Thus, the *agon* covers the comparison between the dramatic arts and sports, the challenge of distinguishing the real from the fake Pentathlos, and the judgment call of whether tragedy is more prestigious than comedy. This *agon* may present a more modern content, but it is by no means more elaborate than the *agon* of Aristophanes' *Frogs*. Sophocles voices his opinion in a curt and defensive manner:

Ὁ κωμῶδὸς Ἀριστοφάνης ποιητής,  
τὴν τέχνην ὑποθέτει τὴν δραματικήν,  
ν' ἀναβιβάσω θέλω ὑψηλότερον,  
διότι, ὅπως λέγει, εἶπον τραγικά.  
Ἄλλ' ὅμως οὐδὲν τούτου ἀληθέστερον!  
Ἡ τραγωδία προεξάρχει κ' ἔπεται  
ἡ κωμῶδία (80-81)

Aristophanes the comic poet  
posits that I want to raise  
the dramatic art to a higher level,  
because, as he says, I speak in the tragic vein.  
But, to be sure, nothing is more true than that!  
Tragedy takes primacy and comedy  
follows

Aristophanes retorts while maintaining the personal tone that the *agon* has now assumed (as in Aristophanes' *Frogs*):

Ἡ κωμῶδία προεξάρχει γνώριζε  
κ' εἰς κρίσεις παραλόγους παῦσαι προχωρῶν,  
πρὶν ἢ σὲ κάμω κωμῶδίας ἥρωα. (81)

Comedy takes primacy, you better realize,  
and don't proceed to absurd judgments,  
or else I make you the hero [butt] of a comedy.

Sophocles calls his Muse Melpomene to the rescue, but Thalia, the Muse of Comedy, follows close on her heels to come to Aristophanes' defense. The two Muses bicker and even threaten each other, until Athena makes her appearance as a *dea ex machina* amid thunder and lightning. At first sight, Athena's presence is not an adequate substitute for appearances by Aeschylus and Euripides, which the reader with knowledge of Aristophanes' *Frogs* might anticipate. The goddess is, however, the unmistakable name-sake of the Panathenaia Festival and thus of this play. Moreover, her name conjures up the dramatic settings of trial and judgment, of justice, vengeance as justice, and (reconciliation after deeds of) revenge, as illustrated in plays by all three of the tragedians.<sup>25</sup> Athena instantly tells Sophocles and Aristophanes to stop quarreling. Next, the intensely political goddess hands the preeminence in the dramatic arts to tragedy, in an interesting exposé in which she explains the weight and function of comedy as well as tragedy:

ὦ ἄνδρες Ἀθηναῖοι καὶ σεῖς ποιηταί!  
Τὸν φοβερὸν ἀγῶνα πλέον παύσατε!  
Τὸ δρᾶμα προεξάρχει ... Εἰς τὰ στήθη μας  
ἀνακυκᾷ παντοῖα συναισθήματα,  
ἀγωνιᾷ ὁ θεατῆς καὶ καθορᾷ  
τὸν βίον τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, τὴν δὲ Νέμεσιν  
ἐτοίμην νᾶ τὸν τιμωρήσῃ αὐστηρῶς,  
ὁπότεν πρὸς τὰ θεῖα εἶναι ὑβριστής!  
Ἡ κωμῳδία δὲ ὑποβιβάζεται,  
διότι μόνον νᾶ γελᾷ προώριστα,  
μὲ τὰς κακίας τῶν ἀνθρώπων· φόβητρον  
ἐμπνέει μόνον τοῖς κακοῖς! Γελᾷ αὐτὴ  
καὶ μυκτηρίζει τοὺς ἀνθρώπους διὰ τὰς  
κακὰς τῶν πράξεις, κ' ἡ αἰδῶς ἀνέρχεται  
ἐπὶ τῶν παρειῶν τῶν πορφυρᾷ ὥς φλόξ.  
Ἄλλ' ὅμως δὲν κακίζει, οὔτε τιμωρεῖ,  
οὔτε τὴν σπάθην σύρει τῆς Νεμέσεως,  
ἵνα σκορπίσῃ τοὺς κακοὺς, τοὺς ἀσεβεῖς  
Τὸ δρᾶμα προεξάρχει! (87-88)

O men of Athens and you poets!  
Put an end now to your terrible fight!

---

<sup>25</sup> Kennedy (2009) traces the figure of Athena in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, Sophocles' *Ajax* and *Ajax Locrus* (a fragmentary play), and in no less than five plays by Euripides: *Ion*, *Suppliants*, *Iphigeneia among the Taurians*, *Trojan Women*, and *Erechtheus* (fragmentary). Interestingly, Athena appears as a *dea ex machina* pronouncing justice in the closing scenes of the first three of these plays by Euripides, whereas *Trojan Women* contains a cameo appearance of Athena at the play's opening. Also, she (2009) 80 introduces issues such as the fallibility of Athena's justice and its association with revenge as justice. On tragedy, verdict, vengeance, and Nemesis, see also below p. /.

Drama [i.e., tragedy] takes primacy ... In our chest,  
it stirs up all sorts of emotions,  
the viewer agonizes and looks upon  
the human being's life, and on Nemesis,  
ready to punish him severely,  
whenever he treats the divine with hubris!  
Comedy, on the other hand, ranks lower,  
because she is destined only to laugh  
with the bad sides of people. As a bogey,  
comedy scares only the bad folks! She laughs at  
and derides people for their bad deeds,  
and their cheeks flush with shame, deep red like a flame.  
But comedy certainly does not cast blame, nor does she punish,  
and she does not draw the sword of Nemesis, either,  
to disperse the bad folks, the impious.  
Drama [tragedy] takes primacy!

Without much hesitation, Athena chooses tragedy over comedy, and she does not even include athletics in the competition. With the lines εἰς τὰ στήθη μας / ἀνακυκᾷ παντοῖα συναισθήματα, / ἀγωνιᾷ ὁ θεατῆς καὶ καθορᾷ / τὸν βίον τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, the goddess casts tragedy's power to arouse the emotions in the familiar Aristotelian terms of pity and fear (δι' ἐλέου καὶ φόβου, *Poetics* 6.2; also 9.11c, 13.1-4, 14.1-5). Athena stops short, however, of mentioning the problematic concept of catharsis effected by such emotions.<sup>26</sup> Notably, in the goddess' voice, Nikolaras makes a double reference to Nemesis, reinforcing Kinyras' earlier naming of Nemesis in Sophoclean tragedy (73, quoted above). Thus, Nikolaras associates tragedy with revenge drama, which brings him closer to Renaissance and early modern times, both heavily vested in the Aristotelian tradition. Revenge drama gained tremendous popularity during the Renaissance by way of Senecan tragedy and Euripides' *Hecuba*.<sup>27</sup> Nikolaras' conception of tragedy does not share, however, Aristotle's prevalent concern with character configuration and with the construction and the intelligibility of the tragic plot.

The hour of evaluation in the *Panathenaia* is not a drawn-out scene, especially when compared to the long decision-making process in the original *Frogs*. Aristophanes had Dionysus evaluate Aeschylus and Euripides at length and had the spectators act as implicit judges.<sup>28</sup> The original comedy also startled its audience when Dionysus, who had gone to retrieve Euripides from the underworld, suddenly decided to bring back Aeschylus. In Nikolaras' play, Athena's verdict does not come as a surprise. As in the ancient play, however, Nikolaras motivates the choice of genre, which substitutes for the choice of playwrights, by invoking the well-being of the Greeks: with tragedy and its teachings, Athens will reaffirm its moral character. Nikolaras pays lip service to the civic advice that the tragic playwright is expected to give. He reestablishes this practice as the decisive criterion, even though this advising is not seen to take place in his own play. The choice of tragedy as the city's educator represents

<sup>26</sup> As Halliwell (1998) 170 rightly observes, Aristotle's *Poetics* offers very little elaboration on the character and function of these emotions, but his *Rhetoric* 2 (2.1.8, 2.5 on fear, 2.8 on pity) is more explicit. Halliwell (1998) 184-201 also discusses the vexed notion of catharsis. Cf. also Halliwell's *Greek Laughter* (2008) 325-327. Lurie (2012) 441 introduces the notion of the sixteenth-century "Aristotelization of Greek tragedy."

<sup>27</sup> See further the collective volume edited by Wetmore (2008).

<sup>28</sup> The centrality of the *Frogs* to the tradition of ancient literary criticism has been discussed by many scholars, but see Hunter (2009) and Porter (2006) for recent analyses.

an acknowledgment of the genre's ethical values, with which comedy is not assumed to engage.<sup>29</sup> Thus, Nikoularas' play brings comedy back into view, even if only by negative contrast. The *agon* of Aristophanes' *Frogs*, itself a comedy, paid little attention to the comic genre,<sup>30</sup> but the play itself still managed to establish its "discursive mastery of . . . tragedy."<sup>31</sup> Compared to tragedy or athletics, comedy as a genre is, however, a less urgent topic for Nikoularas, who appears more interested in the confluence and competition among various cultural constituents. Tragedy may take primacy and may be exalted as the genre that expresses theater's civic function, but the modern comedy stops short of calling the tragic poet the city's savior. Nikoularas' play has thus shifted from working on the personal level with poets embodying genres to operating in the more abstract realms of those genres. Also, by crediting tragedy with seeking the civic good, Nikoularas reinforces the one point of convergence between Aristotle and the characters of Aeschylus, Euripides, and Dionysus in Aristophanes' *Frogs*.

At Athena's request, Aristophanes and Sophocles reconcile. The goddess defines the role and significance of the other characters as well: she calls Kallinikos and Kinyras (tragic poetry and tragic song, respectively) the twin children of the same Muse. In Athena's view, too, the act of the chorus dancer is less prestigious. The goddess further warns the athlete Pentathlos against putting on airs: his achievement is not inferior but is of a different nature altogether. Then Athena calls out Hermes, revealing his identity to the others. She also tells Hermes that Zeus has been looking for him, leaving him to wonder what Zeus might want next. Has Zeus really forgotten that he himself sent Hermes down to earth?! Before taking off, Hermes admonishes the Athenians who, for all their love of the arts and sports, have been neglecting the gods. The Athenians admire their poets and stage actors but seem to have forgotten that the Muses have been their sources of inspiration. They may marvel at Pentathlos' strength but need to acknowledge Ares and Heracles as well. Again, Kephalos invites everyone over to his house for a feast. In good Aristophanic fashion, Nikoularas heightens the celebratory mood of the play's happy-end by broadcasting the wedding of Pentathlos and Arsinoe.

### Comic "Theory" in the Modern Greek Voice

Through Athena's words, Nikoularas expresses the common conception of tragedy that posits that the lives of ancient characters bear relevance for modern lives. This perception has been a persistent belief since Aristotle (*Poetics* 1.2, 2.1, 6.5, 6.7, 6.12, 6.21), and, as Helena Patrikiou argues, this tenet is also common among modernist playwrights of the late nineteenth and twentieth century--in particular Henrik Ibsen and Eugene O'Neill (2002: 284).<sup>32</sup> In the *Panathenaia*, Athena and Kallinikos concur when they point to Sophoclean tragedy's capacity to uphold examples of virtue (73, quoted above), in a verdict reminiscent of Aristotle's famous dictum, ἡ μὲν γὰρ χεῖρους ἢ δὲ βελτίους μιμεῖσθαι βούλεται τῶν νῦν ("comedy wants to imitate people worse than those of today, whereas tragedy wants to imitate better people," *Poetics* 2.7; also *Poetics* 6.1-2). Reflecting on the dichotomy articulated in this passage, Stephen Halliwell warns that it subsequently "harden(ed) into a critical commonplace, and one often translated . . . into narrow and inflexible terms of the social rank of the typical characters portrayed by

<sup>29</sup> Greek comedy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was meant to entertain with light-hearted and often imitative subject matter. Aristophanic comedy, however, had gained a position of greater relevance. In 1868, a socialist-inspired Athenian production of *Wealth* had given the ancient comic playwright a modern political voice. See Van Steen (2000) 50-63.

<sup>30</sup> This point has been made most persuasively by Heiden (1991).

<sup>31</sup> Lowe (2013) 356.

<sup>32</sup> On Ibsen's modernist sensibilities, which spoke to theater-goers across cultures, see the recent volume edited by Fischer-Lichte, Gronau, and Weiler (2011).

the two genres.”<sup>33</sup> Like Aristotle, Athena (again in the words given to her by Nikolaras) acknowledges the importance of comedy but favors tragedy. When she addresses comedy in the second half of her verdict, she resorts not to Aristotle’s literal language but to his conception of comedy as tragedy’s antipode: Ἡ κωμωδία . . . ὑποβιβάζεται, / διότι μόνον νὰ γελᾷ προώρισται, / μὲ τὰς κακίας τῶν ἀνθρώπων (“Comedy . . . ranks lower, / because she is destined only to laugh / with the bad sides of people,” 87). Aristotle had briefly defined comedy as follows:

ἡ δὲ κωμωδία ἐστὶν ὥσπερ εἵπομεν μίμησις φαυλοτέρων μὲν, οὐ μέντοι κατὰ πᾶσαν κακίαν, ἀλλὰ τοῦ αἰσχροῦ ἐστὶ τὸ γελοῖον μόνον. τὸ γὰρ γελοῖον ἐστὶν ἀμάρτημα τι καὶ αἰσχρὸς ἀνώδυνον καὶ οὐ φθαρτικόν (*Poetics* 5.1-2)

Comedy, as we have said, is a representation of inferior people, though it does not cover outright evil. The laughable, however, is a kind of ugliness, and this laughable consists in some flaw or base act that does not involve pain or harmful damage.<sup>34</sup>

The 1902 play recasts Aristotle’s theory in a popular, modern Greek form. Following Aristotle, comedy for Nikolaras corrects certain bad habits and is morally instructive, but it is not a punitive or destructive genre. For him, comedy laughs *at*, not *with*, its characters. With this statement, the modern playwright has come full circle to the claim he made in his preface: Θὰ γελάσητε εὐγενῇ καὶ εὐφρόσυνον γέλωτα, πλὴν συγχρόνως καὶ σκεπτικοὶ θὰ φιλοσοφήσητε ἐπὶ τοῦ συγχρόνου βίου (“You will break into a polite and prudent laughter, except that, because you are also skeptical, you will at the same time reflect on contemporary life,” 5). Halliwell explains that the “weaknesses and foibles” with which comedy typically concerns itself “are restricted to the relatively light and harmless—they must stop short of the point of real vice, and also of ‘pain and destruction.’”<sup>35</sup> After all, matters of “‘pain and destruction’” belong to the realm of tragedy.<sup>36</sup> Aristotle’s “comedy proper offers a mimesis of generalised action and characters,” and it leaves the audience willing to laugh at its own faults.<sup>37</sup> Also, comedy can elicit powerful shame, πορφυρᾷ ὡς φλόξ (“deep red like a flame,” 88). Shame, which is another powerful emotion according to Aristotle (*Rhetoric* 2.6), can spur people’s ethical improvement and serve as a corrective: those who feel shame will try harder to conform to culturally prescribed norms, to fit in with their contemporary societies. Thus, the genre can serve as a *speculum vitae*, a “mirror of

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<sup>33</sup> Halliwell (1998) 267.

<sup>34</sup> Demastes (2008) 11-12 remarks on the long-term effects of this seminal passage from the *Poetics*, in which Aristotle, however, left his thoughts about comedy incomplete (*Poetics* 6.1). Aristotle analyzed comedy in the second book of the *Poetics*, which has not been preserved. Hadley (2014) 18 confirms and further contextualizes Aristotle’s impact on comic theory from the sixteenth century onward. The Renaissance rediscovery (1530s) of Aristotle’s *Poetics* made earlier, Latin-based theories about comedy and laughter lose prominence. See also Halliwell (1998) 266, 274, 276, 290-296. Although acknowledging Aristotle’s influence on the early modern demand for “decorum,” Halliwell (1998) 303-304 hastens to add that neither Aristotle nor one of his interpreters can legitimately be called the sole source of the French Neoclassicist canons. He concludes that the foundation of French Neoclassicism “consisted of the composite, hybrid structure of Renaissance humanism, in which elements were amalgamated from Horace, Aristotle, the rhetoricians and the poetic practice of a range of ancient authors. Superimposed on this were the more specific requirements developed by the French critics from the 1630s onwards—the rational rules of poetic art” (1998) 304. For a brief synopsis of Aristophanes’ reception in early modern times, see Van Steen (2014).

<sup>35</sup> Halliwell (1998) 270.

<sup>36</sup> Halliwell (1998) 272.

<sup>37</sup> Halliwell (1998) 271.



life,” in which individuals can observe their own shortcomings as portrayed in a play’s characters and then strive to better themselves. Nikolaras, however, does not deduce that, if everyone looked in the mirror, the morality of society as a whole would gain and comedy would be able to reclaim the sociopolitical role it enjoyed in the classical age. The *topos* of comedy as a mirror or image of life and/or society can be traced back to Cicero (via Donatus and his preoccupation with the plays of Terence), as much neo-Latin comic theory indeed can be traced back to Cicero.<sup>38</sup> In the process, however, the modern Greek comedy reflects humanist comic theory and sheds light on how this theory was received and adapted in Greece by the onset of the twentieth century.

That a classicizing comedy would become the arena for an *agon* between theater and sports is still a surprise. But this *agon* is fought on the site of Athens, with all its historical, political, and cultural connotations ranging from the classical drama competitions to the athleticism of the ancient city-state. Therefore, this Athenocentric *agon* amounts to a competition among different aspects of what are still the classics. Nikolaras’ loose adaptation delivers a cultural commentary on contemporary circumstances in classicizing form. Taken as a whole, the 1902 play is less concerned with poetics per se than with the moral responsibilities and sociopolitical roles of the various genres or pursuits under discussion. The modern playwright has redrawn the dividing lines between ancient poets, genres, and accomplishments, but he remains well aware that his readership and stage audience can still find common ground in a classical education or in Greece’s continued classicizing.

## Conclusion

Whoever seeks the monuments of a classical education,  
 whoever unearths the statues of no one,  
 . . .  
 will be buried with the statues, alive.  
 So many marbles and archaeologists will go missing  
 and the nation will no longer feed on old glory.  
 (Giorgos Soures in 1882, quoted by Demaras (1977) 404)

Like Aristophanes’ *Frogs*, the 1902 *Panathenaia* of Nikolaras is deeply involved in evaluating the dramatic arts and manly prowess, as well as their functions and representatives. It teases out aspects of the relationship between comic competition, dramatic theory, and theater, creating new forms and functions of and for the latter at the start of the twentieth century. Nikolaras’ attempt at literary criticism, however, converses with the Aristotelian tradition and is not conditioned by the age-long legacy of the comparative study of Aeschylus and Euripides that originated in the *Frogs*. Also, the modern playwright’s engagement with Aristophanes’ corpus is not limited to the *Frogs*. Many other echoes and allusions reveal Nikolaras’ mastery of ancient comedy at large, and his adaptation remains, first and foremost, an expressly liberal amalgamation reveling in the humorous dialectic of past and present. Today’s critic might even conclude that the diversified focus of Nikolaras has not benefited the cohesion of his work. The precise date of the modern play, nonetheless, adds poignancy to the contests among

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<sup>38</sup> Herrick (1950) 57-58, 60, 62, 223-225. Miola (2010b) 930. Nick Lowe (2013) has convincingly argued that the Alexandrian tragedians initiated a tradition of comic scholarship that centered on the intergeneric to antagonistic relationships between comedy and tragedy, as exemplified in Aristophanes’ *Frogs*. McCahill (2013) 79-85 discusses the influence of Cicero’s ideas on humor, as expressed in his *De oratore*, at the papal courts of the Renaissance. I owe this reference to my editor, Philip Walsh.

genres, the variegated skills, and the classical embodiments they invoke. In light of the Greeks' early twentieth-century Olympic aspirations, the 1902 play sharpens the focus on athletics versus arts, or brawn versus brain. But neither sports nor comedy carries off the prize of preeminence before the judgment of "experts." Nikolaras' play does not reassert the comic playwright's role as a critical check on political power-holders but readily hands tragedy the central place in civic discourse. Nevertheless, the play still represents a significant step in the rise of popular comedy in turn-of-the-century Greece, leaving restrictive classical conventions behind and targeting broader audiences. Nikolaras' work provides clues for the future of Greek comic plays, anticipating the heyday of the rich urban tradition of revues named *Panathenaia* of the earliest decades of the twentieth century. Thus, the 1902 play lets the modern reader comprehend what kind of cultural work this and other early comic adaptations in the Aristophanic vein have performed, and to what extent these early versions can be understood as performative acts capable of shaping new, indigenous genres. The strength of Nikolaras' comedy lies, therefore, in its self-reflexive nature, questioning established comic theory by absorbing and ultimately diverting from its ancient models.

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